

1994

## Characters: Portraits by Robert Weaver

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S H E L D O N

# SOLO

MEMORIAL ART GALLERY AND SCULPTURE GARDEN



CHARACTERS: PORTRAITS BY ROBERT WEAVER

# CHARACTERS:

PORTRAITS BY ROBERT WEAVER

JUNE 1 - AUGUST 21, 1994

**1 character n -S 1:** a distinctive differentiating mark: ... **d:** a conventionalized figure, representation, or expression ... **2:** CHARACTERISTIC: as a (1): one of the essentials of structure, form, materials, or function that together make up and usually distinguish the individual: any feature used to separate distinguishable things (as organisms) into categories ... (3): the aggregate of distinctive qualities characteristic of a breed, strain, or type **b:** the complex of accustomed mental and moral characteristics and habitual ethical traits marking a person, group, or nation or serving to individualize it **c:** main or essential nature esp. as strongly marked and serving to distinguish: individual composite of salient traits, consequential characteristics, features giving distinctive tone ... **4 obs:** APPEARANCE: outward and visible quality or trait ...

As part of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery's responsibility and mission to reflect and document the historical development of the visual arts of the United States, we have a commitment to respond to those artists within our own region who contribute to that development. It is within this context that we present *Characters: Portraits by Robert Weaver* as one of the Sheldon Solo series. Lincoln artist, Robert Weaver, has established a regional reputation for his artistic effort and achievements, but he also has become a well-known "character" because of his artistic independence and personality. This current exhibition focuses on Weaver's recent highly charged and bold portrait paintings of local, powerful and influential individuals that capture the subjects/personalities with directness and honesty, often revealing the nature of both the artist and the sitter.

Many portraits have been commissioned, but not painted to gratify vanity. These expressionist paintings are confrontational in their physicality through surface texture, energy and scale, and in their unequivocal gesture and frontal placement of the subject/sitter. Through the artist's deliberate simplification, stylization and exaggeration of the physical characteristics of the sitter, these paintings evoke feeling rather than describe nature. Weaver works in the modern tradition of expressionist figurative artists such as Chaim Soutine and Lucien Freud in which the painting reveals as much about the artist's feeling toward the subject-- which results in his portraits being imbued with great poignancy and emotional objectivity.

George W. Neubert, Director  
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery  
and Sculpture Garden



Karen Duncan, 1992,  
oil on canvas, 41 in.

*The following is an excerpt from a recent interview of the artist, Robert Weaver, by George W. Neubert, curator of the exhibition.*

**GWN:** As I understand it, you studied first at the Kansas City Art Institute and then came here to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to receive your MFA. Are there instructors or artists that you have looked to when you think about your own painting?

**RW:** Yes, there are a couple. Before I went to a formal art school I attended the school of hard knocks for several years. I was twenty-five years old before I started professional training. Five years before I went to the Kansas City Art Institute I started doing art, drawing and painting. Van Gogh comes to mind as the first impressionable artist's work that I could relate to. Also I like Edvard Munch a lot. However, earlier I was an abstract painter, an abstract expressionist and I went through Cubism and the Jackson Pollock stuff before I even went to the Art Institute. I had an exhibition in St. Louis before I went to the Art Institute. The critic of the St. Louis Dispatch said it included a little of everything from realism to abstract expressionism, the whole gamut. He said it looked like there were about 35 different Robert Weavers represented. That comment reminds me of a thing that Theo Van Gogh said of his brother Vincent's work that "every time he looked at a group of paintings he could tell which was Vincent's work." I think that is probably the same kind of thing. It is all learning at that stage but as you get older then things start to clarify.

**GWN:** But your mature work combines aspects of expressionism, realism and figuration.

**RW:** Yes, well you see all of those trends can also be applied to describing Abstract Expressionism.

**GWN:** How about contemporary figurative painters such as Lucien Freud or new figuration?

**RW:** Oh, I like his work. His limited palette is a lot like what an old instructor at the Art Institute used to make us work from. He called it a low-key palette. He stole all that from Cezanne. Then he also had a high-key palette from Matisse. Needless to say I fought with this instructor.

**GWN:** I wouldn't describe your palette as low-key.

**RW:** No, but it was a discipline thing at that stage in my development and I just didn't like to have restrictions put on me. Learning how to mix colors is important in teaching, I guess. I used to utilize all kinds of color on my palette, any and every thing I could get away with. My theory was I didn't like to take time to mix a color palette. By the time you look at the palettes in the canvas your ideas of what you were going to put down might have changed just like



Coach Bob Devaney 1988, oil on canvas, 96 x 72 in.



Christina Hixson & Dog, 1992, oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in.

Self Portrait, 1986, oil on canvas, 38 x 48 in.



Ernst Lied, 1990, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in.



that. You don't have time for that and so now I use a lot of color, but I mix a lot of colors that I didn't used to.

**GWN:** I am curious to know how drawing and printmaking has affected your technique and approach toward painting portraits.

**RW:** Drawing, first of all, I think is very important in paintings and in printmaking you utilize drawing a lot.

Actually the drawing in printmaking, I don't mean to belittle the fact, is probably the easiest part of printmaking. All the technical stuff can hang you up. But drawing is, I think, basically the most important element in printmaking and carries over into your painting. Color and the way you work with color technically has affected or can evoke emotions in painting. I know what certain colors do as you overlap or mix them together and sometimes that carries over into paintings. It can give you an added punch.

**GWN:** But drawing remains fundamental to your creative process?

**RW:** Yes, but drawing people can be very difficult. People are the hardest subjects to paint and the hardest to draw. Though I have been an artist for thirty some years, it never gets any easier. You might get a little better at it but it doesn't get any easier. I still draw a lot. I haven't done much printmaking in the last few years. However, I don't like to work in just one medium. I like to do several things simultaneously.

**GWN:** It seems that many artists within the Heartland have most often chosen to paint the land - the landscape/sky of this region. However most of your paintings have always included people. Your work has been dominated by portraits of individuals and personalities of the region. Can you say why you have preferred these individuals as subjects for your paintings?

**RW:** It seems most local artists paint landscapes all the time. Not taking away from landscapes - I painted landscapes. However, I feel people are more interesting and challenging to paint. Though my portraits are fairly good, that doesn't mean I don't have to work for it. Some of these portraits are people I like, and people I don't like, and I have painted both. I prefer painting a person I have a positive feeling for more than someone who just wants a commissioned portrait, which can become a problem. Sometimes I will put them off and sometimes I just don't have time for them.

**GWN:** Well I think you are hitting on the theme and title of the exhibition "Characters."

**RW:** Well that is a good description of my portraits. That is a good title. When I was a youngster, I read a lot of comic books and wanted to be a cartoonist at that time. Then I got into wildlife illustration and later became a professional artist, so I think some of all of that carries over into what I do now.

**GWN:** So you think this early interest in cartoons is an aspect of being drawn to people who are "individuals" as subjects for your art?

**RW:** Yes, cartoons made an important impression in my life as many things in life do at a very early age. I wanted to be an artist/cartoonist. That was in the war years and there was a lot of Nationalism. Hitler was depicted as a bad guy, and Superman and Batman as good guys. Those exaggerated characteristics made a big impression on me. Yes, I think of characters.

**GWN:** When I hear the word characters I also think of caricature, of physical characteristics that are emphasized or distorted to make a deliberate visual point or punctuate a known reality.

**RW:** Whether it is deliberate or subconscious I think those things get into your work whether you want them to or not. That is why talking about why I do this and why I don't do that in painting - sometime it gets in there whether you want it to or not.

**GWN:** So your own attitude and feelings toward the sitter become part of the painting.

**RW:** I think it shows in some way, shape or form and I don't know whether you have a great deal of control over that. I have scraped off paint and should have left it because it came out the same way the second time and the third time around. Paintings have a tendency to grow on you. They physically get larger than life. I have always liked to paint big, and besides, painting small is very hard. One of the smallest paintings in the exhibition was the hardest thing I ever painted.

**GWN:** Is that because of the scale or the individual/subject?

**RW:** I think it was a little of both. Somebody said it was difficult because you know the sitter too well. The subject of this portrait laughed when I told him that, but I think knowledge and feeling toward the subject gets in there whether you want it to or not.

**GWN:** What is the process or procedure that you utilize to capture both the physical and emotional character of your subject?

**RW:** I like to know something about the person, thing or whatever I paint. The preferred experience is to be more direct than indirect. I had an instructor in grad school that painted baseball pictures that were pretty good paintings. When asked if he ever played ball, he said, "no." I can't understand that. I have to have firsthand experience plus all the indirect stuff through visual research and photography. I take a lot of photographs of the person because I can't always work directly from life or have full access to the subject in developing the painting.

**GWN:** In *Portrait of Mr. G*, which I think is a very successful portrait-- you have known Norman for a long time-- did you also utilize photographs?

**RW:** Yes, I did a lot. I took about three different sessions of photographs. I also did a lot of drawings from the photographs in my sketchbook and then finally started painting. The title *Mr. G* is what I have always called Mr. Geske. I have a tendency to use initials and nicknames for painting titles and that kind of thing - getting back to "characters."

**GWN:** I believe that the portrait of Mr. G is particularly poignant as it captures not only him physically but also reflects his personality and your relationship with him.

**RW:** Oh yes. I agree with you. He was an interesting subject with his exaggerated physical characteristics. He has huge feet and a big head with a lot of brains - obviously big heads have lots of brains. I had to photograph him several times and also had some other photographers photograph him. He has a mouth that is very hard. If you don't get it just right it throws the whole thing off. And fortunately I got it just right. I had a hell of a time. I was living in Missouri then and would come up and take photos of him on impulse. He got irritated and said "you got enough photos now." Mr. G was an impatient sitter. It took me five total months to paint that painting. I remember I started on his birthday or maybe it was on my dad's birthday - one of the two.

**GWN:** Unlike Mr. G's portrait, with Mr. Lied you had different problems. Here is a subject you didn't personally know, a man you had not met. How-

ever, you seem to capture his personality, or should I say character.

**RW:** I went to Las Vegas to visit with Christina Hixson and I talked to her a lot about him. In addition I learned a lot about what Mr. Lied was like by interviewing several people who knew him well. I was also provided a few snapshots of him that weren't very good. The photograph that they finally gave me to work from was the worst photograph I ever had to work from for a portrait painting. They ought to give me the medal of honor for that painting. Nobody else could have done it. That sounds arrogant but that is exactly the way I feel.

**GWN:** You really get a sense of a personality when you stand in front of that painting.

**RW:** Well, yes. You know when you "got" them and you know when you don't. If I hadn't captured his personality, that painting wouldn't be there. It would have been 86'd a long time ago. I had a hell of a time getting what he was all about - I think I did. All that stuff is in the painting and after a while you do know the man - you know something about him.

**GWN:** How about Coach Devaney's portrait for the UNL Athletic Department?

**RW:** Actually, I did about three paintings of him. One I destroyed, and the other one was the largest one. I started that painting three times. I tried him with hats, but I learned he doesn't like hats because he was always losing them. I tried a black and white painting and it didn't work and then the third time around I got it. Don Bryant came out and looked at the finished painting and said "oh, you got that Irish sparkle in his eye and everything." I felt very good about it. Devaney also liked his portrait. I feel it is historically a very important painting.

**GWN:** Well, I think it is interesting that you have said when you painted the Devaney portrait you weren't trying to capture Devaney during a particular time or place, but you were dealing with Devaney as a legend covering a twenty-plus-year-period and what he brought to this community and the University football program.

**RW:** I think that painting will be there long after you or I. It was several years before the University got around to honoring him and it came at a good time.



Ky Rohman, 1993,  
oil on canvas,  
20 x 16 in.



Double Portrait, 1967  
oil on canvas,  
90 x 66 3/8 in.



# CHECKLIST

1.  
COACH BOB DEVANEY  
1988, oil on canvas  
96 x 72 in.  
Collection of the UNL Athletic Department
  2.  
ERNST LIED  
1990, oil on canvas  
48 x 60 in.  
Collection of The Lied Center for Performing Arts
  3.  
KY ROHMAN  
1993, oil on canvas  
20 x 16 in.  
Collection of Carl and Jane Rohman
  4.  
JANE ROHMAN  
1994, oil on canvas  
36 x 30 in.  
Collection of Carl and Jane Rohman
  5.  
JOHN ROBERT DUNCAN  
1992, oil on canvas  
41 in. diameter  
Collection of Karen and Robert Duncan
  6.  
KAREN DUNCAN  
1992, oil on canvas  
41 in. diameter  
Collection of Karen and Robert Duncan
  7.  
SELF PORTRAIT  
1986, oil on canvas  
38 x 48 in.  
Collection of the Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearney, NE  
Nebraska Art Collection, Gift of Lorraine Rohman
  8.  
H.H. WEAVER  
1978, oil on canvas  
41 in. diameter  
Collection of Vivian and Fred Kiechel
  9.  
CHRISTINA HIXSON & DOG  
1992, oil on canvas  
60 x 84 in.  
Collection of the artist
  10.  
JENNIFER M. LEHMANN  
1992, oil on masonite  
22 3/4 x 18 1/2 in.  
Collection of Jennifer M. Lehmann
  11.  
PORTRAIT OF NORMAN A. GESKE (MR. G)  
1982-83, oil on canvas  
84 3/8 x 67 1/4 in.  
NAA-Gift of the Rogers Foundation  
1983. N-613
  12.  
DOUBLE PORTRAIT  
1967, oil on canvas  
90 x 66 3/8 in.  
Nebraska Art Association Collection  
1969.N-236
  13.  
40TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY  
1978, oil on canvas  
92 3/4 x 111 1/2 in.  
NAA-Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts  
(1978.N-492)
  14.  
JASON LEHMANN  
1993, oil on canvas  
33 1/4 x 28 1/4 in.  
Collection of the artist
  15.  
SKETCHBOOK  
n.d., mixed media  
Collection of the artist
  16.  
SKETCHBOOK  
n.d., mixed media  
Collection of the artist
  17.  
MICKEY MOUSE DRAWING WALT DISNEY  
1994, pencil and colored pencil on paper  
29 x 22 1/2 in.  
Collection of John and Catherine Angle
- ON THE COVER  
PORTRAIT OF NORMAN A. GESKE (MR. G) 1982-83, oil on canvas  
84 3/8 x 67 1/4 in.



Robert Weaver was born on September 9, 1935, in Stilwell, Kansas. He received his B.F.A. degree from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1965, and his M.F.A. degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1968. Weaver has received several academic awards, including the Tamarind Lithography Printer Fellowship from the Tamarind Lithography Workshop, Inc. in 1966, and the William Vreeland Award from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1967. Group exhibitions that have included examples of Weaver's work include the 23rd National Graphic Arts and Drawing Exhibition, Wichita Art Association, Wichita, Kansas, in 1967; the National Print and Drawing Exhibition at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, in 1968; the Contemporary Figurative Painting in the Midwest Invitational Exhibition at the Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, in 1977; and Trains and Other Things at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1979. Weaver's work has been showcased in solo exhibitions at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1972; Slippery Rock State College, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, 1973; and the Center for the Visual Arts Gallery, Illinois State University, Bloomington, Illinois, 1978. Robert Weaver's work may be found in numerous public collections, including the St. Louis Art Museum in St. Louis, Missouri; the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska; and the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Nebraska.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one person exhibitions by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth-century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

The Sheldon Solo series is supported by the Nebraska Art Association, a non profit membership organization dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska through educational and cultural enrichment opportunities. Additional funding has been provided by the Nebraska Arts Council, a State agency, through a basic support grant, which has supported all the year's programs of the Nebraska Art Association.

